

A Projected Fear: How Crime Coverage Magnifies Crime Occurrence

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

The job of media is to inform people and deliver news to them. However, the media also plays a role in the perceptions and views of its audience. This persuasion is instrumental in terms of opinions toward crime. Though crime rates in both America and Canada have been decreasing for over a decade, crime coverage has increased significantly. Therefore, citizens believe crime to be rampant and uncontrolled. While some places do experience and abundance of crime, the fear that is permeating society is unwarranted. In this analysis, the author will examine the media's role in crime perception. Additionally, the author will compare the United States and Canada in regards of crime rates and perception. Finally, the author will investigate the findings in order to determine the correlation between crime coverage and crime perception.

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It is a fact that Americans fear crime and victimization. Americans lock their doors, walk in groups, and carry weapons—all to avoid being a victim of a crime. However, public perception of crime justifies these feelings. After all, the media reinforces the idea that the world is a scary place. The evening news shows crime after crime, giving Americans a reason to be afraid. Author Travis C. Pratt (2009) writes, “...The media have discovered that, in the United States, “crime sells,” and Americans are constantly bombarded by images of crime and victimization whenever they turn on their television set or open a newspaper” (p. 33). These images undoubtedly affect the viewers and remain as events to fear. At times, this fear becomes so extreme that precautions are taken.

The American Firearms Institute (Firearms and Firearms Ownership, n.d.) states that 40-50% of United States homes own a firearm. Perhaps, then, the comfort of a home and feeling of security is not keeping them safe, but the presence of a firearm. Should this be the case, they do not really feel safe at all, but are hiding behind the protection of a weapon.

Yet, does it matter that they are hiding behind weapons? At least these people feel safe in their homes and they know their family is protected. Furthermore, is it not better to be cautious than naïve? Homeowners are aware of crime occurrence and are simply taking matters into their own hands. What is the problem with that?

The problem is that it is unnecessary. Statistics indicate that crime has decreased. As recently as 2010, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has reported a 5.5% decrease in violent crime since 2009 (Oppel, 2011). Richard A. Oppel (2011) of *The New York Times* noted that the extremely low crime rate is puzzling to experts;

In all regions, the country appears to be safer. The odds of being murdered or robbed are now less than half of what they were in the early 1990s, when violent crime peaked in the United States. Small towns, especially, are seeing far fewer murders: In cities with populations under 10,000, the number plunged by more than 25 percent last year (paragraph 2).

With such a drastic drop in crime rates, Americans should be feeling safer. There should be fewer firearm sales and less fear of victimization. However, the American fear of crime has actually increased over the past decade. Where is the disconnect? Perhaps it is in crime perception.

Review of Literature

United States

While researching American crime, the author was overwhelmed by the amount of variables in any given study. There was certainly a lot of information to be found, and the author discovered most of the pertinent information. However, many studies had broad focuses, and did not narrow their field. For example, the section entitled 'Television' published by the Federal Communications Commission explored all types of broadcast television. The FCC described revenue, stories, length, and viewers (Television, n.d.). With this wealth of information, finding what one is looking for is difficult. If the FCC had narrowed their study to perhaps news revenue or news stories, perhaps they would have found more conclusive results.

In Gallup's poll regarding the fear of walking alone at night, researcher Lydia Saad neglected to note where exactly the study took place. However, the study was

categorized by income, which often lends an idea to location. Nevertheless, a study being conducted in urban New York and urban Wyoming makes a significant statistical difference. Thus, knowing the income of those polled does not help in geographic matters. The lack of these statistics makes it difficult to determine whether fear is attributed to media coverage, or a dangerous neighborhood.

In Stephen Dubner's examination of the fear of strangers, Dubner explicitly mentions the Muslim faith of Atif Irfan. He continues by insinuating that Irfan's Muslim appearance was one of the main reasons that Irfan was removed from an airplane. However, Dubner does not support his inference with any statistics regarding ethnic profiling. Furthermore, he does not list any statistics regarding stereotypes involving terrorism (Dubner, 2009). While Dubner delivered a valuable opinion, his lack of reference caused it to be disregarded. If Dubner had elaborating and listed figures, perhaps it would have been easier to include stereotyping into the author's study.

There were certainly lapses in statistical findings throughout this study. Certain factors could not be compared because information in regard could not be found. The largest inconvenience was in trying to find a longitudinal study of crime perception. While the author found data for certain years, she was unsuccessful in locating crime perception over the span of a decade or more. This data would have been advantageous in comparing with the data of crime coverage and of crime occurrence. Another consistent problem was that of finding relatively current data. Some data, while it confirmed the author's stance and was available, was ten to fifteen years old. With no other data of that type to utilize, the author was in a conundrum regarding using the outdated data or removing the comparison entirely.

Canada

While researching Canadians' perceptions of crime, the author found that the largest gap in research was in specificity of concepts. While Canada's national data website listed the amount of residents who were satisfied with their personal safety, they did not list what exactly that meant. How is satisfaction of personal safety defined? Other data sources define personal safety as being able to walk alone in one's neighborhood at night. However, the lack of definition makes the statistics hard to cross-examine because researchers are unsure of what to compare the numbers against (Brennan, n.d.).

Further research brought the author to how the Canadian media covers crime. The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (n.d.), or CRCVC, published a lengthy article regarding this topic. However, the section entitled "complexity of what is covered and what is not" is noticeably small. Furthermore, the CRCVC is vague in their description of how the media chooses what to cover. They explain that the selection is made by various people within the media source, without noting what stories take priority. The publication could have added information on why some crimes are given more coverage time than others, and what those crimes are. Do violent crimes always get more coverage? The CRCVC makes it difficult to understand how the media reports crime because they do not specify exactly what crimes the media is reporting (CRCVC, n.d.)

Similarly, in the article "Victims and the Media," also by the CRCVC, research is limited. The article covers a plethora of topics from the intensity of media coverage to the coverage of minorities. However, the section titled "Innocence" is severely lacking. CRCVC notes that victims of terrorism, as well as children, are seldom blamed for their

victimization (CRCVC, n.d.). However, it misses the ethical issues surrounding innocence in victimization. Francine Hughes killed her husband, Mickey Hughes, in 1977 by burning him. She confessed to the murder immediately after and continued to admit her guilt. Hughes explained during her trial that her husband continually abused her for 14 years, threatening death in some instances. Despite divorcing him, the rage and abuse continued. The jury found her not guilty by reason of temporary insanity (Diliberto, 1984). In this instance, Hughes' victimization justified the murder of her husband. Would she then be innocent? The CRCVC does not say, leaving much to be desired from their brief paragraph.

Methodology

This research presentation ultimately hopes to examine crime perceptions in relation to crime occurrence. The author will do this through examining media, race, location, and many other variables. The two locations that will be examined are Canada and the United States. These countries will be cross-examined to determine if there are differences in crime and perception amongst the two nations. Finally, the differences will be evaluated with the hope of finding what is being done to minimize and magnify the fear of crime.

Definition of Concepts

Media

Media comes in different forms (radio, newspaper, magazines, etc). However, 'media' in this paper will henceforth refer to television. More specifically, 'media' will refer to televised news, both local and national. With a smaller focus, the information becomes more manageable.

Televised news is the most prominent media in the lives' of Americans (Internet Overtakes Newspapers As News Outlet, 2008). Only 35% of surveyed adults receive most of their news from a newspaper, while 40% receive it from the Internet. An overwhelming majority (70%) receives their news from television. Thus, because television consistently reaches the largest amount of people, it is logical that it be the focus.

The visual nature of televised news creates an unparalleled lasting effect. Video affects viewers more so than the printed word. For example, during the September 11, 2001 attacks, footage of the burning Twin Towers were continuously played. Visions of the resulting death and destruction dominated the news for weeks following. While there was certainly adequate newspaper coverage, the videos of the actual buildings are what linger in the viewer's memory. Furthermore, the use of broadcasters has an emotional effect on viewers. Tone, body language, dress, and attractiveness all play a part in how the news is perceived and how the viewer reacts.

Crime

The crimes focused on in this paper will be violent crimes defined by the Uniform Crime Report (UCR). The UCR classifies aggravated assault, forcible rape, murder, and robbery as violent crimes. The reason that the author has chosen to narrow the study to violent crimes is that violent crimes generally receive more press and media attention, comprising approximately one third of what is broadcasted on the news (Television, n.d.). Citizens typically have higher levels of anxiety in regard to potential violent victimization than property crimes, which occur more regularly. To be clear of what each crime entails, they will be explained.

Aggravated assault, defined by the Uniform Crime Report (UCR), is the attack of one person by another with the purpose of inflicting injury. Aggravated assault is never accidental and is always carried out intentionally (Uniform Crime Report: UCR offense definitions, 2011). Forcible rape, as defined by the UCR, recently acquired a new definition to be more inclusive of possible victims. The new definition reads, “Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (Ryan, para. 5, 2012). Murder, as defined by the UCR, is included with nonnegligent manslaughter. Both are defined as “the willful killing of one human being by another” (Uniform Crime Report: UCR offense definitions, 2011). Robbery is similar to theft in that the goal of both is to obtain someone else’s property. However, robbery uses threat of force, violence, and intimidation to meet this goal (Uniform Crime Report: UCR offense definitions, 2011).

Country

The two countries that will be examined in this study are the United States and Canada. The United States and Canada are very similar. The United States is made up of individual states, while Canada is made up of individual provinces. They are roughly the same size. Canada is 3,855,103 square miles, while the United States is 3,794,083 square miles. While the United States has approximately 9.2 times more people than Canada, the demographics of those people are similar (Similarities & Differences Between Canada & United States, n.d.).

Demographics are significant in any crime, because that is what witnesses are asked to recall. Police question any witnesses on physical characteristics, such as race,

height, and build. In the United States and Canada, the age structure is the same, with the United States having a slightly younger population. Canada has 68.5% of its population between the ages of 15-64 years, while the United States has 66.8% of its population in that range. In terms of ethnicity, both countries have relatively the same Caucasian population, with Canada having 2.3% more. The United States has a significantly higher (10.8% more) population of black people than Canada (Similarities & Differences Between Canada & United States, n.d.).

Within those demographics lie more similarities. Both countries have 99% literacy levels. Both countries have a similar percentage of divorced citizens, United States with 6% and Canada with 5%. The United States is only 1% more urbanized than Canada (82% and 81%, respectively). The countries have the same amount of doctors, suicides, and tobacco usage. The only significant difference found in these numbers between Canada and the United States is the populations (Similarities & Differences Between Canada & United States, n.d.). Could that be the factor influencing the major difference in crime perception? Though the countries are around the same size, the United States has a larger population density. Perhaps this crime could be from overcrowding or proximity.

Crime & Perception in the United States: An Overview

In the study “Crime in the United States” by the Uniform Crime Report, all violent crimes are listed from 1991 through 2010. With each crime, there is the rate of that crime, as well as the number of the specified crime that occurred in the given year. Amongst this sea of numbers, a noticeable pattern stands out: the crime rate is declining. Incidence of violent crime, and therefore the crime rate, has steadily decreased since

2006 (FBI, n.d.). There are only two numbers on the table that appear to rise: the year and the national population. Despite the growing number of people, the national crime has decreased.

In 2010, the number of violent crimes known to police was 1,246,248 in the United States. This is approximately a 6% decrease from 2009. Furthermore, the 2010 number was 13.6% below the 2006 national figure. The most common violent crime was aggravated assault, accounting for 62.5% of all violent crime. Murder ranked at a measly 1.2%, down 4.2% from 2009 (Crime Rates Fall Again, 2011).

In terms of time, a violent crime occurred every 25.3 seconds—about two crimes per minute. The most frequent crime, as earlier implied, is aggravated assault, occurring every 40.5 seconds. One robbery occurs every 1.4 minutes, while one forcible rape occurs every 6.2 minutes. One murder occurs around every 35.6 minutes, making for a little over 40 murders every day (Crime Clock, 2010). However, it must be noted that while crimes occur frequently, they do not necessarily occur at every interval that the crime clock specifies. For example, a robbery may not occur nationally for 20 minutes. As the crime clock is a mathematic equation, it does not account for this lapse in time. The numbers given are from simple mathematical equations with the goal of making crime occurrence more tangible and approachable to the common person.

As of 2011, the city with the highest rate of violent crime was Detroit, Michigan, with 2,137 incidences of violent crime per 100,000 people. St. Louis, Missouri ranked as the second most dangerous city, ranking fourth nationwide in murders (Fisher, 2012). While the numbers in this section may appear overwhelming, further examination of them will reveal common patterns and trends.

In the United States, there is an immobilizing fear of strangers. Stephen J. Dubner, author of *Freakonomics*, discusses this fear and how it affects daily American lives. He examines the stories of Bruce Pardo and Atif Irfan to begin his illustration. Pardo was a churchgoer who dressed up as Santa Claus and killed his ex-wife and her family. Upon learning of the crime, family friends were shocked and could not believe it was the same Pardo that they had known (Dubner, 2009). Irfan, who is of Muslim faith and ethnicity, was not allowed to take a domestic flight from Washington to Florida. Irfan and his family, who were on their way to a conference, were escorted from the plane and questioned by the FBI. Even after the FBI determined the Irfans were not a threat, they were still not allowed to board the plane.

Irfan was born in Detroit, MI and lived in Alexandria, VA. By birth, he is a citizen of the United States (Dubner, 2009). Pardo was not feared because he looked familiar. He was a white, middle-class, family man-- a common sight in the United States. Irfan, however, stands out amongst a crowd at the mall or the airport. He is not stereotypically "American", though he is an American, just as Pardo is. Dubner used these stories to demonstrate that America's preconceived notions and the fact that on many occasions, those notions are wrong. Pardo was the last man expected to kill his family, Irfan the first expected to be a terrorist. Tim Wise supplements Dubner's views on racial profiling, examining terrorist profiling specifically, "What the supporters of profiling ignore is how such actions might increase the risk of terrorist attack, not only by causing us to let down our guard...but also by reducing the willingness of law-abiding Muslims or Arabs to cooperate with law enforcement" (para. 22, 2005).

Dubner explains that people store away the “anomalies” in crime, such as school shootings and terrorist attacks. Because these events affect the memory so strongly, people begin to see the events as common. Dubner (2009) continues, “The people who didn’t seem to fear Pardo were friends and relatives. The people who did fear Irfan were strangers. And they got it all backward. In general, we fear strangers much more than we should” (para. 12). He justifies his claim with statistics. Sixty-four percent of women who are raped know their attackers, as do 61% of women who are victims of aggravated assault. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (n.d.) proclaims this fact in large, bold letters on its website: “In 14% of all murders, the victim and the offender were strangers” (para. 2). Nevertheless, Irfan, not Pardo, was perceived as a threat because he looked different and no one knew him.

Gallup conducted a crime survey in 2010 to examine the fear of crime. Gallup discovered 37% of Americans said that they would be afraid to walk alone at night within a mile of their home (Saad, 2010). This question is commonly used on surveys measuring fear of crime. Gallup has been conducting this study for 35 years and found the highest level of fear to be in 1982 at 48%. The graph that Gallup gives shows a steady ebb and flow from 30 to 50 percent, with their 2010 data showing a slight rise from previous years (Saad, 2010). In regard, Saad (2010) eloquently states, “This trend in Americas’ perceptions of their personal safety contrasts with federal crime statistics showing a sharp, steady decline in the rate of violent crime...over the past 16 years” (para. 4). Additionally, Gallup statistically controlled fear of crime by gender and income level. Of those reporting least afraid of crime, 87%, were men who make \$75,000 or more per year; most afraid of crime, 59%, were women who make \$30,000 or less per year (Saad,

2010). Saad (2010) concluded, “In fact, while the violent crime rate has dropped steadily each year...the percentage afraid to walk alone at night has rebounded somewhat, suggesting fear of crime is not necessarily dictated by reality” (para. 10).

In 2009, Michigan State University for the Federal Communications Commission studied televised news serving 98 metropolitan cities and 77 suburban cities. They found that local news content not relating to crime was severely underreported. Local news consists of county and regional government, community events, and the like. National and international topics, such as business and natural disasters, were more prevalent in news broadcasts. The topic which received the most coverage was crime, at 32.4%; accidents and disasters and human/community interest received around the same amount of coverage, 12.2% and 13.0%, respectively; business topics received 18.2% of coverage. The combined total of all county government and regional government, as well as education and uncategorized topics, was 11.5% (Television, n.d.). However, crime consists of almost a third of all televised news surveyed in Michigan State University’s study. Though crime in the U.S. has been decreasing, is it sensible for news broadcasts to still be showing such a high percentage of crime?

Some Americans may not be affected by televised news, simply because they do not believe that it is accurate. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press investigated this matter in 1985 and again in 2005. In July of 1985, 55% of those polled believed that news organizations “get the facts straight,” while 34% believed that “stories [are] often inaccurate.” Twenty years later, those numbers have reversed. Now, only 29% of those polled believe that news organizations “get the facts straight,” while 63% believe that “stories [are] often in accurate” (Pew Research Center, 2009). Even more interesting

is 8% of those polled in 2005 said they “did not know” in regards to news accuracy, a 3% decrease from 1985. This demonstrates that not only are more people forming negative opinions of news media, more people are forming opinions of news content in general, implying that they watch and evaluate the news.

Viewers are examining the news more closely in comparison to what they know to be true. In addition to these findings, Pew research found that 60% of those polled believed news organizations were politically biased. Additionally, 70% of viewers, an all-time high, believed that news organizations “try to cover up their mistakes” (Pew Research Center, 2009). It appears that there are two main types of televised news viewers: those who believe and are afraid, and those who reserve their belief and are skeptical. While it is encouraging that not all Americans believe everything they see, the stark dichotomy of viewers may not be socially or politically healthy for the United States.

A study of news media from 1993 through 1997 found that the coverage of murders on network evening news shows rose over 700%, during a time when the actual crime rate was dropping (The News Media's Coverage of Crime and Victimization, n.d.). The “if-it-bleeds-it-leads” philosophy appears to have become the slogan for televised news. Despite the inaccurate picture that heavy crime coverage paints, members of the news industry stand by their decisions. For example, Cheryl Fair, a news director of KarABC-TV Channel 7 stated, “We don’t cover stories based on statistics...I don’t care where you live, I don’t think the statistics say this has become a safe area” (Braxton, para. 10, 1997).

Americans are being affected by the choices of Fair and other news directors, as a poll by the Los Angeles Times found. Out of 1,143 respondents, 80% said the media's coverage of violent crime has increased their own fear of being a crime victim. Additionally, 52% of respondents say that they are considerably more fearful of being a victim because of the crime coverage (Braxton, 1997). The impact appears to have had a deeper impact upon the beliefs on the viewer. In the short time that the crime appears on the news, the viewer recognizes several things. Firstly, that crime is violent. Secondly, because coverage is episodic, large outcomes and extended context are not given and therefore not understood by the viewer. Additionally, in the briefness of the clip, the appearance of the "prime suspect" is mentioned (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2008). If the prime suspect is 6'3", African-American, male, in his late 20s, that is what the viewer associates a criminal as, at least for that moment. After viewing enough of these broadcasts and suspects, a viewer can begin to create racial prejudices. Though unintentional, the media has implanted a racial lens that is hard to remove.

Crime Perception in Canada: An Overview

Crime in Canada has also been decreasing. The 2011 count of violent crimes was 424,410, approximately a fourth of that of the United States. This number is around 10,000 less than the violent crime number reported in 2005 (Canada at a Glance 2012, 2012). The largest contributor in all listed violations was assault, with 226,440 violations. Second to assault, were threats, with 71,945 threats occurring in 2011. The number of homicides in 2011 was 598, decreasing by over 100 homicides in 2005 (Canada at a Glance 2012, 2012). There is a violent crime rate of 1,231 crimes per 100,000 people (Rivait, 2012). Additionally, the homicide rate is an incredible two per 100,000 people.

There are approximately 1,162 violent crimes per day in Canada, which amounts to one crime every 74 seconds, a third of the United State frequency. A homicide occurs around every 14 and a half hours, 28 times less than a United States murder. The 2011 crime statistics gave Canada the honor of having the lowest crime level in 39 years (CBC News, 2012).

The most dangerous city in Canada is Prince George, British Columbia. The city ranks first for both violent and non-violent crime. With a population of 73,590 people, the crime severity in Prince George is 113.7% above the national level of crime severity. While a large crime rate for a small population sounds alarming, the crime severity has actually gotten lower. Since 2005, the crime severity has decreased by 17.4% (Canada's most dangerous cities 2011, 2011). Despite the decreased crime, citizens of Prince George deny that their city is dangerous. Royal Canadian Mounted Police Superintendent Dahl Chambers says the statistics are misleading. He explains that the numbers do not account for multiple crimes by the same offender. Additionally, they do not account for gang-on-gang violence which does not affect the community as a whole. Chambers insisted that the last time there was serious gang violence was in 2004 and that their homicide level is one of the lowest nationally (CBC News, 2008). Residents of Prince George echo Chambers' comments, saying that these statistics are a poor reflection of their city (CBC News, 2008). With the large amount of local backlash, it appears that the "most dangerous city in Canada," is quite possibly not as dangerous as reported.

Canada has also seen flux in regards to its fear of crime. However, the range from 1970 to 2000 was 25% (1997) to 37% (1974). The national average of those who fear walking alone within a mile of their home was 31% (Roberts, n.d.). In addition to these

findings, researcher Julian Roberts examined where the concerns of Canadians lay. The results were consistent; Canadians did not consider crime to be a substantial problem. Instead, Canadians are concerned with health care. In one survey involving a range of options, health care was decided as the highest priority, with 33% of those polled selecting it. Crime and justice was chosen by 2% of those polled. In a 2001 study that asked people about unaided issues that Canada's leaders should be most concerned about, 16% selected the economy. Unemployment was seen as the second most important at 11%. Crime and justice, the final choice, received just 4% of votes (Roberts, n.d.). Perhaps the reason that Canadians are less afraid is that they simply do not think about crime.

Canadians are comfortable with where they live. In a 2009 study, researcher Shannon Brennan (n.d.) found that 93% of Canadians said they were satisfied with their personal safety from crime. Additionally, 83% of those polled said they were not worried when home alone at night. Of those who walked alone in their neighborhood at night, 90% felt safe doing so (Brennan, n.d.).

Canada demonstrates disproportionate amounts of violent crimes to coverage of violent crimes. The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (CRCVC) explains that this happens because of Canada's lack of violent crime. Violent offenses represent less than 6% of Canada's reported offenses. Furthermore, homicide makes up less than 1% of all crime committed in Canada. The CRCVC (n.d.) explains, "Every year, approximately, 600 Canadians are murdered and because murder remains a relatively rare event in our society, most of these murders will garner some media attention" (para. 15). Crimes such as breaking and entering, property theft, and assault are less likely to be

covered because of their frequency. However, these crimes are typically covered if there is an unusual element, such as extreme amounts of money or a lengthy history of violence. Crimes in rural areas are less likely to receive coverage due to their distance from the media outlet. Most media sources cannot afford to send their reporters great lengths to cover stories, so they focus on urban areas (CRCVC, n.d.). Rarity of occurrence, dramatic circumstances, and geographic proximity are all reasons why Canadian news sources may choose to cover murders.

Like the United States, Canadians have a false fear of crime. A telephone survey of 1,639 Canadians asked whether they thought violent crime was increasing. The study found 54% of those asked agreed that violent crime was increasing, 33% disagreed, and the remainder were unsure. Like the results of the American study, females and lower-income households were more likely to view crime as a growing problem (Edmiston, 2012). However, it is not.

In 2011, violent crime in Canada dropped by 5%. Homicide and sexual assault against children, though, saw a slight increase (Edmiston, 2012). The study was conducted at an opportune time, between July 25 and 26 of 2012. Around ten days prior, a block party shooting in Toronto killed two people and injured two dozen others. Less than a week before the study was conducted, the Aurora, Colorado, theatre shooting occurred, killing twelve people. The conductors of the poll suggested that these recent events had caused a shift in crime perception. Pamela Rutledge, director of Media Psychology Research Center in California, confirmed this. She explained, “[Recent mass shootings] really trigger a sense of fear in use because they aren’t explainable”

(Edmiston, para. 7, 2012). While the data found by the survey is inevitably skewed by the recent shootings, it is current, which was the primary goal of the study.

The United States and Canada: A Comparison

In both Canada and The United States, crime is decreasing, and has been for several years. Homicides and other violent crimes are at national lows, yet coverage is increasing. While these countries are actually becoming safer, the media paints them as becoming exponentially more violent. These crimes are most often covered because it is what interests the public and what keeps their attention. Most people would rather know about a murder in their neighborhood than learning how milk is made on the local farm. Not only does the notice of a murder affect their daily safety, but it affects their viewership. If the audience knows that televised news will consistently deliver information they find pertinent, they will continue watching. For media stations, while crime coverage is important in keeping citizens safe, it may also be instrumental in developing a loyal fan base. With that being said, are those who consider the news to be inaccurate any better off? They may not exhibit the same fear because of skepticism, but they also may overestimate their own security. The viewers, however, might consider their lack of fear to be a fair trade; at least they are comfortable in their surroundings.

Excluding a small portion of the population, the larger proportion of both Americans and Canadians worry. The media's crime coverage causes people to be afraid to walk outside of their own home after dark. This is not to disregard the possibility that the neighborhood might be dangerous, rather the proportion of actual crimes to crime coverage reveals that is likely less dangerous than they believe it to be. Crimes occurs more frequently in Detroit, Michigan alone than in the entire country of Canada, yet

Canadians still worry about violent victimization (Rivait, 2012). Perhaps, this is because when they see the news, they only see local Canadian news stories with no concrete point of reference. They may not see the crimes in Detroit or any other major American cities. They see the one murder per day, and they see hours of stories covering it. Canadians may not have a true understanding of the amount of crime they have because there is no consistent comparison. This is not intended to belittle the seriousness of crime or its impact on its victims, rather note that in comparison Canadian perception of crime may be high, while actual occurrence is low in comparison to the United States.

Why Do People Stay?

If individuals believe that crime is so prevalent, why do they stay where they are? Though people have lives, families, and jobs, one would assume that they would uproot themselves if they believed their lives and/or family were in serious danger. When surveyed, 58% of Detroit citizens said that crime is their biggest daily challenge, while 66% said that the city is on the wrong track (MacDonald, 2012). From these statistics, people do believe they are in danger. Thus, one would reasonably assume that they should move. However, the same study continued that Detroit, the crime capital of the United States, is expected to see only a 40% decrease in population by 2017, a significantly lower proportion of those who said that they were dissatisfied (MacDonald, 2012). If living in the most dangerous city in The United States cannot convince residents to move, why do they stay?

The reality is that most people do not have the option to move into a safer area. The cities with the most crime are often also the cities with the highest level of poverty. The median income level for these cities is often significantly below the national average.

In Detroit, the median income is \$26,098, which is 48% below the national average (McIntyre, Sauter, & Stockdale, 2011). With such a low income, it is not feasible for a family to sacrifice their social life, comfort and employment to move to a better neighborhood. When families are struggling to pay the rent, they certainly cannot move. So what do they do? How does a family survive in a dangerous environment?

For some, crime is not a deterrent. Brad and Alissa Romans moved to Buffalo, NY from Detroit and said the two were incomparable, though Buffalo also ranked on Forbes' list of most dangerous cities. The Romans admit to being victims of crime, explaining that they have had their bicycles and car stolen. However, the couple still appears happy with where they live. They mention that they take frequent walks, something that they did not feel comfortable doing in Detroit (Cummings, 2012). For others, it is a matter of arming themselves. In 2010, Chicago, one of the most violent cities in the United States, had more of its police officers killed by gunfire than any other city in the nation. In June of 2010, the United States Supreme Court banned the city's right to bear arms. As a result of this, Chicago mayor Richard Daley changed the city's laws, making it expensive and difficult—but possible, to obtain a handgun license (Bauman, 2010). However, this changed has not significantly changed the safety of the Chicago area.

In 2009 and 2010, the total number of firearms produced exceeded five million for the first time since 1986. However, the data table with this information, published by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (n.d.), only extends as far back as 1986. Because there were barely 3,000,000 firearms produced in 1986, it is likely that 2009 and 2010 manufactured the largest amount of firearms ever. The state with the

largest number of *registered* firearms was not Michigan, as would be expected, but California. In fact, there is a large difference between the two states. As of March 2012, .7% of California's population had registered firearms, amounting to 268,479 firearms. Michigan's firearm ownership included .3% of its population at 36,080 registered firearms (Thomas, 2012). While Michigan, theoretically, could still have more total firearms than California (since this data only includes registered firearms), that appears unlikely. Because gun manufacturing has increased, so have gun sales. In 2011, gun sales were at 10,037,110 per capita, up significantly since 2003, when gun sales were 6,333,371 per capita (Horwitz, 2012). From this data, it would appear that as crime coverage increases, and thus, fear, so do gun sales. Although these findings could be unrelated, the correlation appears to be more than coincidental. Perhaps the reason many Americans are staying in their homes despite their fears is because of gun ownership. While not every American who is afraid owns a gun, it must be said that guns do provide a feeling of safety. Whether or not the gun is ever used, simply owning the gun may be enough to allow the scared citizen to rest easy.

For those who choose less aggressive routes, there is the security system, which approximately 14% of homeowners own (How a Monitored Security System Affects Crime Statistics, n.d.). There are a variety of different systems, giving home owners the chance to have the most basic or most elaborate system. The Greenwich Study of Residential Security found that homes without security systems are 2.7 to 3.5 times more likely to be burglarized. Additionally, nine out of ten burglars said they would not steal from a home with a monitored security system. It is estimated that having a home

security system costs around \$40 per month (How a Monitored Security System Affects Crime Statistics, n.d.).

Whether or not a security system makes a person feel safe depends on the person. Bruce Schneier describes the psychology of security and how it varies. He states that the feeling of security is determined through psychological responses to risks and countermeasures. He continues, “You might feel that you’re at a high risk of burglary, medium risk of murder, and low risk of identity theft. And your neighbor, in the exact same situation, might feel that he’s at a high risk of identity theft, medium risk of burglary, and low risk of murder” (Schneier, para. 4, 2008). With this explanation, it can be inferred that some people do not find the need for security systems. The ones who do find a need, however, experience a feeling of safety because they have taken a large countermeasure against crime.

Limitations in Research

With further time and resources, the author would have liked to compare crime perception against different factors. While this research accounted for socioeconomic status, race, and country, other factors would have provided a larger picture of what affects perception. Other factors that the author would have liked to examine are family upbringing (growing up in a two parent household, etc.) and crime within the family. Additionally, the author would have examined the perception of crime in small towns against large cities. Furthermore, she would have examined the perception of crime in a small town after a significant crime has been committed, such as a homicide.

The largest burden while researching was finding data of similar scale and measurement. While the author could find applicable data for America, she could not find

similar research from Canada for comparison. The lack of consistency in the data certainly made the research difficult. The more detailed the research, the fewer matching statistics. Therefore, while it was relatively simple to find broad statistics, more detailed and arguably more statistically significant data were at times nowhere to be found.

Ideally, the author would have liked to conduct a more thorough study that included different countries. Then, further comparison could have been done to determine crime perception patterns in North America and other continents. Additionally, crime perception could have been studied in countries with higher rates of tourism, such as France and Italy. While researching, the data regarding crime perception in other countries appeared scarce or non-existent. There simply was not a strong enough base of information to compare against the wealth of information regarding the United States and Canada.

While other countries were not examined in this paper, it stands to wonder whether the fear of crime is prominent in other countries. Is it a human issue, or a North American issue? Do countries with lower crime rates have less fear, or are they afraid of the little crime they have? International studies are difficult to conduct, and few appear to exist that focus on the fear of crime. However, several news articles from countries such as Turkey and the Netherlands discuss crime in their area. Additionally, the authors hypothesize how to combat crime. With these findings, it appears that the fear of crime transcends North America. As long as crime exists, there will always be people who are afraid of it.

Conclusion

The truth is that this both the United States and Canada are safer than they have been in decades. Crime occurrence has been decreasing for over a decade. Violent crimes are at record lows. While crime still happens and is important to focus on, it is getting better. Despite this, gun sales are increasing. American and Canadians do not feel safe at night in their own neighborhoods. Where is the disconnect? Why are people not realizing that their countries are actually getting *safer*?

The disconnect lies in the media, specifically in televised news. Crime coverage has been increasing and more murders, rapes, and other crimes are being televised. The news is showing less community events, less weather, less political happenings, and more crime. Crime is at the forefront of every news station's agenda and on every viewer's television. It is because of the disproportionate coverage that some Americans and Canadians do not believe the news or do not regard it as important. However, some would argue that those people traded off a life of fear for a life of ignorance.

Regardless of which choice a viewer takes, they lose. If they choose to watch the news, they subject themselves to large amounts of crime and inaccuracy. Additionally, it is likely that their priorities and thoughts change as a result of the televised news. If a citizen chooses to abstain from the news, they may be living in ignorance of their own surroundings. While their goal is to avoid crime, they also avoid weather, community events, and other important announcements. By avoiding crime, the viewer inevitably misses out on other valuable information.

The media has changed the way that people view their surroundings. It has changed the way they view the people at the gas station. It has changed the way they view their neighbors. Televised news serves a positive purpose: to inform society of what

is happening. However, the positive purpose has spun out of control, creating a misinformed society. The media has magnified crime occurrence to gargantuan proportion, creating a society of fear.

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